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SUBJECT: RESTARTING UNHCR TRIPARTITE MEETINGS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: PolOff recently met with officials from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the DRC's National Commission for Refugees (CNR) to discuss USG interest in restarting tripartite meetings. UNHCR recommended that the USG send observers to the Tripartite Working Groups to add credibility and importance to the process. The CNR recommended that the USG become more involved in organizing/facilitating the Tripartite Working Group meetings. Active USG participation will potentially give the GDRC political and diplomatic coverage to reach out to its neighbors to resolve refugee issues, a key stumbling block to finally achieving peace in the region. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) PolOff recently met separately with UNHCR's External Relations Officer and the Congolese Permanent-Secretary to the National Commission for Refugees (CNR) to discuss USG interest in restarting tripartite meetings with the DRC's neighboring countries, UNHCR, and the GDRC. Both UNHCR and CNR officials were very receptive and eager to resume formal dialogue and negotiations for refugee returns.

¶3. (SBU) Per UNHCR, the security situation in eastern DRC had until recently effectively put the Tripartite meetings on hold. UNHCR External Relations Officer Francesca Fontanini said that the GDRC has not addressed land issues in the east, although one NGO appears to have had recent success with land issues. Arche d'Alliance has helped form local mediation committees in North Kivu that apparently have a 70% success rate in resolving land disputes. UNHCR would like to create an awareness campaign promoting this model. Fontanini said that UNHCR would recommend that the USG send observers to the Tripartite Working Groups to add credibility and importance to the process.

¶4. (SBU) According to the CNR interlocutors, the GDRC recognizes the need to re-energize the Tripartite Working Groups. However, the uptick in armed conflict last fall prevented continuing with the process. The GDRC has been in close communication with Rwanda, Angola, Tanzania, and Zambia on refugee issues. However, it has had trouble getting responses from Uganda and Burundi.

¶5. (SBU) The CNR agreed that resolving land issues is the key to solidifying peace and creating a favorable environment for refugee returns. However, it feels that facilitating the return of IDPs in a given area should have precedence over facilitating the return of refugees. To resolve land issues, the CNR is searching for a mechanism that would include both traditional chiefs and civil society. The highest concentrations of land issues/conflicts are found in traditional chiefdom areas. The CNR Permanent-Secretary, Rigobert Moupondo, suggested that local mediation committees could help resolve most of the problems.

¶6. (SBU) The CNR recommended that the USG become more involved with helping organize/facilitate Tripartite Working Group meetings. It also recommended that the U.S. provide support to arrange for "go and see visits" to try to convince refugees to return back home. Finally, it recommended that the USG provide financial support to the CNR.

¶7. (SBU) Our engagement with the UNHCR came against the backdrop of recently reconvened Tripartite Working Groups for the

DRC-Rwanda-UNHCR and the DRC-Angola-UNHCR. The result of the April 7-9 DRC-Angola-UNHCR meetings is a new verification/census of Angolan refugees in the DRC that will begin in May. The next DRC-Angola-UNHCR Tripartite Working Group will meet in the summer to discuss planning actual repatriations.

¶8. (SBU) The April 14-16 DRC-Rwanda-UNHCR meeting produced an agreement to continue efforts to improve the economic conditions in Eastern DRC, to entice DRC refugees in Rwanda to return home, to intensify the public awareness campaign for Rwandan refugees in the DRC to return back home, to reinforce mechanisms that prevent refugee recycling, and to clarify the legal status of civilian refugees living in both countries. Per UNHCR, the next DRC-Rwanda-UNHCR Tripartite Working Group meeting will take place in July at a location to be determined.

¶9. (SBU) The next DRC-Tanzania-UNHCR Tripartite Working Group is scheduled for May 15. However, per UNHCR, there have been no recent agreements to reconvene the DRC-Uganda-UNHCR Tripartite Working Group or the DRC-Burundi-UNHCR Tripartite Working Group.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: Both UNHCR and the CNR welcome increased USG interest and participation in the Tripartite Working Groups. In the current situation, there is growing political pressure (reftel) to facilitate the return of IDPs and refugees in North Kivu. Active USG participation will potentially give the GDRC political and diplomatic coverage to reach out to its neighbors to resolve refugee issues, a key stumbling block to finally achieving peace in the region. End comment.

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